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Gathering the sounds of the Voice

THE VILLAGE VOICE ANTHOLOGY (1956-1980)
Geoffrey Stokes, editor
William Morrow. 331 pp.
$15.50 hardback; $7.50 paper

Reviewed by
Ken Tucker

When The Village Voice set up shop in 1956 it was a scruffy little weekly newspaper whose primary purpose seemed to be the printing of left-wing screeds guaranteed to stir up its neighborhood community, New York's Greenwich Village. Twenty-six years later, the Voice is a national publication that runs pieces that range across the political spectrum, along with some of the finest arts criticism in the country.

Like all radical papers, it has been accused of "selling out" — most bitterly when Clay Felker took it over in 1974 and tried to bully it into being a slick movie-star magazine. What he didn't count on was the feisty spirit of the staff members, who resisted Felker's worst ideas while permitting him to tidy up the layout of the newspaper.

Editor Geoffrey Stokes had a difficult task, and not only because collections of journalism can date faster than Edie Sedgwick. The Voice houses a group of staff writers who must be the most talented — but also the most eccentric, and periodically the most self-indulgent — bunch of scribblers in the history of journalism.

Yet Stokes' selection of Voice classics is a sensible one. From Don McNeill's account of the bloody 1968 "Yip-In" at Grand Central Station to Richard Meltzer's celebration of videocassette recorders, this is New Journalism at its most aggressively personal.

It is surprising, though, that Stokes has padded the book with the work of famous people who, while they did indeed appear in the Voice, do not in any way represent the spirit of the publication: for what reason other than their big names are Ben Shahn, Donald Barthelme and Pete Hamill doing here? All are represented by mediocre work.

The great virtue of *The Village Voice Anthology* is that it immortalizes a few classic pieces. Mark Jacobson's "Paranoid Notes on the Death of Bruce Lee" is a landmark of contemporary humor, a slash-and-tickle tale of pop obsession that makes Hunter Thompson's "gonzo journalism" seem faint-hearted.

It's a measure of the excellence of the Voice that this anthology reminds you of all the pieces that are missing. Surely a few items from Alexander Cockburn's savagely witty "Press Clips" column could have been included, and while I like Meltzer's video piece, it sent me looking through my file for his great "Meltzer at the Met" story from 1974, in which the author whittles down the essential appeal of opera: "Operatic noise is the most culturally sanctioned form thereof, and noise is something everybody likes an occasional dose of."

Ken Tucker is The Inquirer's popular music critic.

Children's books

Reviewed by Ann Waldron

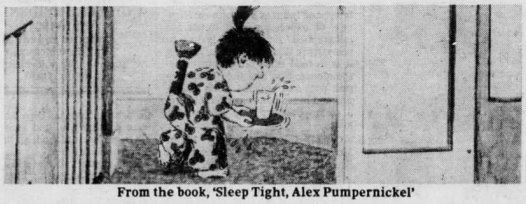
LEGEND OF THE MILKY WAY
By Jeanne M. Lee
Holt. $11.50
Ages 5-8

The author's illustrations are striking, and her retelling of an ancient Chinese legend brings to light a majestic legend of fatal love.

A young farmer who plays the flute attracts the attention of the seventh daughter of the King of Heaven, the weaver princess. She leaves her loom and the heavenly courts and goes down on the clouds in search of the sound of the flute. She eventually marries the young man and is "happy with him in his small house."

But her mother sends the Heavenly Guards to bring her back. The Queen Mother takes a silver pin from her hair and draws a silver river across the heavens to stop the young farmer from joining his wife. She then turns each of the young people into stars, one on each side of the Silver River.

The King of Heaven takes pity on the lovers and lets them be united once a year. "On the seventh day of the seventh month, the blackbirds of the heavens form themselves into a bridge across the Silver River and the weaver princess crosses over to visit her husband." The weaver princess is the star Vega, the earthly husband is the star Altair and the Silver River is the Milky Way.



From the book, 'Sleep Tight, Alex Pumpernickel'

SOMETIMES I THINK I HEAR MY NAME
By Avi
Pantheon. $9.95
Young Adult

Conrad Murray is the son of divorced parents. He lives in St. Louis with his aunt and uncle, who are genuinely devoted to him. Conrad wants very much to visit his mother and father in New York during spring vacation, but his aunt and uncle send him instead to London to visit cousins.

Conrad flies to New York as scheduled but never gets on the plane for London. He hides in New York and tries to find his parents. He takes refuge with a girl he had met in the travel agency in St. Louis. The girl, Nancy, and her family are so bizarre that they are totally unbelievable.

Conrad himself is quite believable as he is forced to face the fact that his mother and father have no time for him and that his aunt and uncle are better to him and more interested in him than either parent.

In spite of Conrad's growth and change, this is a dreary, profoundly depressing book.

SLEEP TIGHT, ALEX PUMPERNICKEL
By Fernando Krahn
Atlantic-Little, Brown. $7.95
Ages 4 up

This delightful book has no text, just charming black and white pictures that tell several stories.

All the stories are about a little boy named Alex Pumpernickel who is seldom up to much good. In one story, he pretends to sleepwalk in order to get a fat slice of chocolate cake. In the next, he sneaks another piece of cake and kneels beside his bed to eat it, so he can pretend to be saying his prayers when his mother comes in. In the next, he has nightmares about a piece of cake and wakes to find he has been sleeping on top of the plate and fork. And so on.

No moral. No lesson. Just a funny little boy.

Children's books are not as widely distributed as other trade books. However most booksellers are willing to order such books at a customer's request.

A constellation of future literary greats

AUTHORS, from Page 1

ered that remarkable moment when several of the most influential writers of the early decades of the 20th century lived and labored in a small self-created community, has inspected it with sympathy, wit and intelligence, and found in it much that is central to writers and readers of any period. His stylish, consistently moving and frequently surprising book is one of the most original works of literary history in many years.

Crane was the heart of the group as well as its most celebrated member. At 29, he had a reputation as a brave and resourceful war correspondent, an innovative and thoroughly American writer of remarkable stories, novels and poems, and as a generous, fiercely loyal friend.

He had, at the time of his Christmas party, a little less than six months to live. He was, according to Ford, "the most beautiful spirit I have ever known. He was small, frail, energetic, at times virulent. He was full of fantasies and fanaticisms."

Crane played, with some relish as well as a degree of self-satire, the role of the laconic cowboy for the press, although he came from New Jersey. Most of his best work was inspired not by his experiences in combat, or down and out in New York's Bowery, or living the hard life of the West, but by careful research and an astonishingly fertile imagination. Only after he had written his masterpiece, *The Red Badge of Courage*, did he observe a battle firsthand.

He knew that he had tuberculosis, although he had been assured by a physician that it was not a serious case. Defying the disease, he lived in a drafty 14th-century manor house with poor drains. He wrote feverishly, constantly, dictating when he was too ill to lift a pen, always rallying. He insisted that his friends keep the state of his health a secret from Cora, his lover.

Wells, Conrad and Ford, along with Crane's many other writer companions, were profoundly affected by his death. Images of a promising, fiercely life-seeking but sometimes self-destructive artist were to appear in later fiction by each of them, inspired by Crane.

None of the circle was more distraught than James, who two days after Crane's death in a sanitarium in Germany wrote, "What a brutal, needless extinction — what an unmitigated unredeemed catastrophe! I think of him with such a sense of possibilities and powers." One of the many accomplishments of Delbanco's narrative is to give us a portrait of a more human James, removed from that chilly, proper, frowning figure to which he has often lately been reduced.

In retrospect James' lines seem not only moving but just. Crane's work was full of promise, but it lacked the resonance, the universality, of the very best fiction, and it was uncertain at his death whether he might be capable of developing into a major figure.

At the turn of the century such doubts seem to have troubled each of these companions — except the ebullient Wells, who tossed off ideas the way a steam locomotive scattered sparks, who plowed irresistibly ahead, moving without pause from fiction to essays to newspaper columns to nonfiction books.

Ford, eventually the author of about 50 books, was slow to strike a direction, doing his best work in the '20s when he produced his quartet of novels on the first World War, culminating with *The Last Post*.

Conrad wrote slowly, with great effort, but he wrote steadily, and his reputation grew with equal deliberation. James suffered the fate of elevation into the literary establishment without becoming successful in the marketplace.

One of the most refreshing aspects of Delbanco's narrative is his emphasis on the companions' careers — on the daily hard business of being a writer. Their later stature has obscured their early struggles: All of them were intent on doing whatever they had to in securing a living and a reputation.

Crane and Conrad discussed drafting a melodramatic play to be set in the American West, which Crane assumed would be a tremendous success. All of them considered, and some of them attempted, airy romances, then as now a hugely popular genre. It is just as well that these schemes faltered: Failing as hacks, they were forced back to their art.

From *Group Portrait* we also come away with a sense of the hard life even well-known writers faced. Publishers paid poorly, and to survive one had to write constantly, beginning a book or a series for a newspaper as soon as the last sheafs of a just-completed work had been sent off.

All of them labored furiously. And in 1900, success did not guarantee acceptance by society. Writers, especially writers not from the universities, were treated like tradesmen.

So that tiny community in Kent served not only as a refuge of disparate literary craftsmen. It provided them briefly with support, with a sense of shared goals and with the vital reassurance that the very different paths they were exploring were important, entirely new, infinitely promising.

In tracing in detail those few good, gay months when Crane still lived, and in following the careers of his friends as causes, successes and the steady accumulation of suspicions and resentments that is also a part of the literary life moved them apart, Delbanco has produced a work that is as lively, as closely observed, as moving and as revealing of character as a masterful novel.

This is not entirely surprising: He is the author of 10 widely praised novels. What is astonishing is that there is so much here that is new. He has rescued a moment when several of the writers who would become pre-eminent in the English-speaking world knew one another, helped one another, and had a close and lasting impact on one another's work.

Richard E. Nicholls is on the staff of Books/Leisure.

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